

Do Service Dogs Improve Safety and Quality of Life in Children with Disabilities?

Jessica Wilson, Deborah Cullen¹

¹Science of Nursing Care Department, Indiana University School of Nursing

Although the use of service dogs is not a new concept, the practice of service dog intervention to improve safety and quality of life is relatively novel. Research studies have described that service dogs aided a decrease in overall arousal and enhanced a dramatic increase in expressive language for a child with autism. Notably children were more focused and attentive as well as laughed more after dog sessions. Since the sample sizes of service dog studies are small, a meta-synthesis of research articles relating to dogs assistance for safety and improvement in quality of life for disabled children was conducted. The purpose of doing a meta-synthesis is to explore studies with the same phenomenon of interest and compare and contrast the findings while describing the phenomenon. A rigorous methodological protocol was used for this meta-synthesis as described by the Joanna Briggs Institute. The online software Narrative Opinion Text Assessment and Review Instrument (NOTARI) developed by the Joanna Briggs Institute permitted the authors to evaluate and engage with 22 studies to determine quality, credibility and outcomes. Findings, in the form of themes, are entered with an illustration of the participants' voice. These themes were further evaluated and aggregated to represent an interpretive meta-synthesis. One meta-synthesized theme found across the research was improved family quality of life. This is illustrated, for example, as dog-calming and promoting less problematic behavior as well as decrease in the stress response allowing the child body to relax. A second meta-synthesized theme of safety emerged as dogs are tethered to the children with autism to keep them from bolting. Parents felt that the child was safe with the service dog by the child's side. These findings have robust clinical recommendations which may significantly impact families and disabled children.

Mentor: Deborah Cullen, Science of Nursing Care Department, IU School of Nursing IUPUI